

# Clocks and Watches in a Buyer's Market But Few Buyers at the Ready

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

I admit it. I'm part of the problem.

I have been an avid clock and watch collector and dealer since 1980 and have sold more than 1,700, but I still own many. However, at a recent clocks, watches, and scientific instruments auction at Skinner, I never raised a paddle.

About to receive my new Medicare card, I just watched as nice clocks were passed, failed to make their reserve, or were hammered down at prices I would have found irresistible even in the recent past. I tell people that now is a wonderful time to buy, but I don't take my own advice.

Obviously, I'm not alone. Many of my friends and colleagues sadly say the same. Among the small group of room bidders that day in October in Marlborough, MA, a few did bid and buy, but only for true favorites, not with the happy abandon of days gone by. They paid \$5,228 (including buyer's premium) for a rare circa 1830 Simon Willard striking tavern clock estimated between \$3,000 and \$5,000 and \$1,353 for an English James Brock quarter-chiming japanned long-case clock estimated between \$1,000 and \$1,500 but did not buy many other equally desirable specimens.

The auction total, including buyers' premiums, was \$696,000, with 92 percent

**Figure 1.** This French late eighteenth-century enameled skeleton clock with calendar and moondial was estimated between \$30,000 and \$35,000 but sold for \$24,600. Maker Jacques Joseph Castagnet and enameler George Adrien Merlet were identified. COURTESY OF SKINNER AUCTION HOUSE.



of lots sold, mostly to anonymous phone and Internet bidders. But if not for the attendance of two John Delaneys—father and son—many more good lots would have failed or sold at even deeper bargain prices. In some cases this family team, representing Delaney Antique Clocks in West Townsend, MA, did not even wait for the asking bid to drop to its lowest point before raising a paddle. And more than once, their opening bid was the winning one. Their purchases included the following:

- A 30-day seaweed marquetry long-case clock by Michael Knight of London, circa 1700, estimated between \$15,000 and \$25,000 sold for \$10,455.
- An early eighteenth-century long-case clock movement in a twentieth-century case by James Ayme of London estimated between \$5,000 and \$8,000 sold for \$3,690.
- A mahogany long-case clock by John Harrison, circa 1790, estimated between \$2,000 and \$4,000 sold for \$1,230. Please note that this clockmaker is not the John Harrison of longitude fame.
- An Elnathan Taber mahogany tall clock, Roxbury, MA, circa 1810, estimated between \$3,000 and \$5,000 sold for \$5,843.



**Figure 2.** This Japanese double-foliot Kake Dokei estimated between \$4,000 and \$5,000 sold for \$5,228. COURTESY OF SKINNER AUCTION HOUSE (2).

- A Simon Willard tall clock, with a mahogany case attributed to Stephen Badlam, circa 1790, estimated between \$20,000 and \$40,000 sold for \$46,125.

A familiar bargain hunter, Pennsylvania dealer Rick Merritt, was successful on several lots, usually paying well below the listed low estimates. A circa 1800 Patison mahogany long-case clock from Dublin, IRE, already carried a typically conservative Skinner estimate of \$300-\$500, but it sold to Merritt for \$185. Clearly, the lumber, let alone the movement, has higher value. He bought a French gilt and porcelain shelf clock, circa 1890, for the same price at the same estimates. An early twentieth-century walnut master clock signed "International" was \$246 on a \$400-\$600 estimate.



**Figure 3.** This banjo clock signed "A. Willard, Jr. / Boston" on the dial and movement exceeded its conservative \$1,000-\$1,500 estimate to sell for \$3,198.

Only one of a collection of six fine glass-domed skeleton clocks found buyers. These were from a discriminating collector who purchased the clocks from high-end English dealers, including Derek Roberts. A circa 1840 astronomical model had an aggressive estimate between \$14,000 and \$16,000, but it opened and stalled at the first asking bid of \$11,000—below the reserve. The next four also failed, and only another circa 1840 example—a miniature with oversize

great wheel—found a buyer who placed an Internet bid of \$984 against a \$1,000-\$1,500 estimate. An additional skeleton clock is shown in Figure 1.

Of course, there were bright spots and high points. Nearly all of an impressive collection of 21 antique timekeepers from Japan reached or exceeded their estimates, which may reflect continued strong prices for Asian items by Asian bidders. All were made be-

**Figure 4.** This 8-day marine chronometer, ca. 1900, signed by Lilley & Son, London was estimated between \$2,000 and \$4,000 but sold for \$1,476. COURTESY OF SKINNER AUCTION HOUSE.



fore Japan's conversion to Western time in the late nineteenth century and had various unusual escapements and indicators to show their earlier system of hours, which lengthened and shortened with the seasons. Twelve of the clocks were bought by one absentee bidder. An additional clock is shown in Figure 2.

In a handful of other cases Skinner estimates also proved almost laughingly low, but not as often as in past sales. An elaborately carved mahogany hall clock, retailed by Boston's Bigelow, Kennard & Co., circa 1900, sold to the phone for \$11,070, well over the \$1,200 high estimate. Three lots later, and demonstrating a recent trend in strong prices for nineteenth-century Black Forest clocks, a German automaton Potato Eater clock, circa 1840, made \$1,353 on a \$200-\$400 estimate, prompting auctioneer Stephen Fletcher to state that the room bidder "mashed the competition." One of the Japanese clocks, a Dai Tokei lantern clock on a wooden stand estimated between \$5,000 and \$7,000, sold to an absentee bidder for \$18,450.

The catalog cover lot sold on the phone for \$30,750, its hammer price nailing the \$25,000 low estimate. Standing 84 inches high, it was titled a "Monumental Carved and Gilded Perpetual Calendar Wall Clock," circa 1855, by the Calendar Clock Co. in Hartford, CT. A period stereo view photograph showed this clock in its original location, the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs, NY, known to be the largest hotel in the world by 1870.

As usual, there also were several lots of high-end reproductions by well-known modern makers Elmer Stennes and his successor, Foster Campos, as well as E. Howard reissues from the 1970s. For those of us who have had trouble understanding the strong appeal of these clocks, this auction's prices seemed more realistic at or below their estimates and past sale results. A Campos gilt-front girandole banjo wall clock sold online for \$2,214, inside its \$2,000-\$4,000 estimate and well below the top prices I've seen. A well-done reproduction lighthouse clock with a "Simon Willard"-engraved brass dial estimated between \$3,000 and \$5,000 sold to a Delaney for \$3,690. An additional banjo clock is shown in Figure 3.

A few twentieth-century Chelsea clocks did well. Two circa 1911 examples were in brightly polished tambour-style bronze cases—a less common form and usually found with an old, dull dark brown patina. Both had \$1,000-\$1,500 estimates, and one sold for \$1,599 and the next for \$1,476 (Figure 4).



**Figure 5.** By Japy Frères & Cie, ca. 1890, this carriage clock features hour-repeating as well as subsidiary dials for alarm, day of week, and date. It was estimated between \$3,000 and \$3,500 and sold for \$3,321. COURTESY OF SKINNER AUCTION HOUSE.

There were later bargains in lots of marine chronometers and deck watches, and also in carriage and desk clocks. Two Swiss art deco partners' desk clocks from the 1920s, with identical faces on both sides, had \$200-\$400 estimates but sold for \$123 and \$154. A carriage clock is shown in Figure 5.

A boatload of watches sold next, led off by lots of gilt pocket watch keys (Figure 6), which all exceeded their estimates. Better-quality pocket watches by Howard were sold singly and within their published price ranges, followed by dozens of bag lots of lower-end multi-

ple pocket watches from a large estate whose executor specified that this department, not Discovery, handle them. Examples included five Illinois hunter-case watches (\$400), 35 Swiss watches (\$1,353), 11 Elgin watches (\$338), and 12 Waltham watches (\$400).

After this onslaught of pocket watches, a few wrist-watches were offered. A Swiss Omega Speedmaster automatic chronograph estimated between \$2,000 and \$2,500 made \$1,845, a Heuer Autavia GMT stainless steel chronograph estimated between \$1,500 and \$2,500 made \$8,610, and a Gallet National Park single-button chronograph estimated between \$1,000 and \$1,500 made \$923.

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### About the Author

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Reviews of auctions and their items may be directed to the editor at [editor@nawcc.org](mailto:editor@nawcc.org) or mailed to the Publications Department at the address on the inside front cover.



**Figure 6.** These European gilt watch keys estimated between \$600 and \$800 sold for \$2,091. COURTESY OF SKINNER AUCTION HOUSE.